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Presumptions

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Presumptions

Mary Dengler

“She’s up there, vacuuming again,” I said
Of Anne, my upstairs neighbor. Nothing more
To occupy her time than watching dust
Accumulate—a sad, pathetic, wasteful
Fate, I hurriedly assumed. Divorced,
She’ll find no mate awaiting her return
From military life. And time for friends
Is rare: a truck or car occasionally parks
Outside. She’s not a reader, I assumed;
No great books break her rituals of work. Just aging
Parents each July to cook, clean
And sit with her before the screen. Just killing
Time with rituals—cleaning, shopping, church.
“Is this what she foresaw?” I asked, “that year,
Enlisting as a hopeful girl, or later when
She made it her career?” Supply clerk for
The troops—what kind of work is that? I’d hear
Her move about at 4 a.m., then out
The door by 5, in full regalia, even
Heavy boots, then home at 5 to chase
The dirt from room and hall and clothes till TV
Took her off the clock.

Turning a page
In *Mrs. Dalloway*, I heard Woolf’s scorn.
She’d wince at my assumptions. She preserved
Each person’s mystery. She honored every
Mrs. Brown. From upstairs oven-cleaning
Fumes descended wrath-like on my tea.

When weeks of scentless silence overhead
Declared Anne gone, I asked a neighbor “Where
And how is Anne?” “Deployed in Qatar,
Near Iraq,” she said. Anne’s typed letter,
Thumbtacked to our condo board, detailed
Heat, dazzling sand, endless streams
Of military men and women through her camp
Where she equipped them head to foot, her marches
Under desert sun in heavy boots

On blistered feet, repeated chants from minarets
To Allah, rock from GI radios, and smells
Unlike the Midwest plain, the pain of muscles
Overused. "But the food is good," she wrote.

When she returned, we dined simply where
She ordered baked potato, pork chop, pie
And quietly sat, as if she'd never left.
"What was it like?" a neighbor asked. She helped
Her father with his plate before she spoke:
Outfitting hundreds in protective gear from inside
Airless tents, always under threat alerts:
"We never knew if we'd be bombed." And boots
on open sores made marching hard, and trying
To shower first, before the guys; and hearing
Dirt from younger women in her troop.
She'd stare straight ahead, she said, when targeted
By verbal sexual missiles from the men. At night
She'd try to clean her room before she fell
Exhausted on her bed. "The food was good,"
She said. "My room was never free of *dirt*.
My *feet* still hurt. But I made friends I'll never
See again. I wish I could have told them
More of Jesus' love. I don't know who
I helped. No one seemed to care if any
Of us were there. I'm glad I went. I'm glad
I'm back. It really was *okay*."

I watched
This tall, straight girl of 50, growing mythic
In proportions now, with clean blond hair,
Gently lead her father to her clean
Bright car. I looked at my apartment later
On that night. It needed light and cleaning
Long and deep. I knew we'd sleep below
Athena, warrior, artless child of God.